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The Whale and the Worm

NOW THE WORD OF THE LORD CAME TO ME, and I said, respectfully, hell no. The Lord wanted me to go out and warn everybody about what was coming, which, quite frankly, I'd been doing for quite some time with nobody giving a damn and really, at this point, the writing was on the wall, the goose was cooked, the fat was in the fire—pick your apocalyptic idiom. I was just sitting down on my back porch with my morning cup of tea to gaze upon my cherry tree. The blossoms were about to come into their glory. In a few weeks they would blanket my yard in their tender snowfall. I liked to sit and admire my tree every morning before I got down to work on my book. My book. The book I was writing. It would stand as a testament for future generations. A record of the last days. The tragic saga of those who fought for life against a system that devoured everything for the sake of shareholder profits. I'd chronicled the whole struggle, from the early days with the speeches and the rallies, to the phone campaigns and the petitions, the pipeline sabotages and the rail blockades. The dogs and the tear gas and the water cannons. The arrests. The trials, covered by all the papers. The jail sentences. The letter writing. The cheering crowds when we were released. The negotiations with corporate bosses that ended in political grandstanding and more false promises. I gave half my life to the cause and we were defeated. Let the historians of the future—if there are any—read my record.

I had just taken a sip of my tea when a grey jay dropped out of the gritty sky onto my porch railing. She looked at me out of one eye, then the other. Shook out the shimmer in her wings. Said: "I need your assistance with something."

I offered her a cup of tea, which she declined.

"I need you to organize a campaign," she said. "Bring out your people. Make some noise."

"You know," I said, "I'm kind of done with all that."

"But they're going to cut down our very last sanctuary," she said. "To make way for a stadium. Or a parking lot, I can't remember. Either way, the trees will be gone."

"All human toil is for the mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied," I said. Sagely, I thought.

"City council voted this morning," she said. "Twelve to two in favour. In favour of more of everything except life."

"I wish I could help," I said. "I really do. I'm not in touch with anyone anymore. Anyway, we both know they'll get what they want in the end."

"Will they?" She fluffed her feathers. "What about Clayoquot Sound? What about Northern Gateway?"

"Okay. Sure. We saved a forest. We cancelled a pipeline. Meanwhile they razed the Amazon and laid enough pipe elsewhere to get oil to the moon. Anyway, who were the two?"

"The two?"

"Who voted against."

She named them, but I didn't recognize either.

"Someone needs to tell those buzzards at city hall how this is going to end," she said.

"I already did. No one listened, remember."

"Tell them again."

"Listen," I said. "I've got an obituary to write. For the planet." I stood up. "I wish I could help. Truly."

I needed to get out of there, to someplace quiet where I could finish my book. Away from talking birds. Away from the city with its rotten capitalist soul and its inflated mayor with his pompous comb-over and his pack of obedient councilors. On Airbnb I found a cabin called The Writer's Refuge. I hadn't flown in thirty years and I wasn't about to now. I booked a berth on a ship and packed my suitcase. In the morning, as I locked my back door, I took one last deep lungful of my cherry tree's perfume. She still beguiled the bees in spring. There was yet sweetness in the world.

The storm hit us two days in. The waves were irate. They flung us up and punched us down. Hail bulletted the deck. The crew blasted the

fog horn, shouted into the radio, fired up flares. No one answered. I watched them with a stone of guilt in my gut. I should've listened to the jay. The Lord does not enjoy being fucked with. We were in serious danger. I knew what needed to be done. I begged the captain to let me take a lifeboat, but he ignored me, so I threw myself overboard.

Inside the whale it was dark and putrid. I lay in a briny stew of soggy plastic bags and floating cigarette butts. I had to push quilts of stomach lining away from my face just to take a breath.

"Why didn't you just let me drown?" I asked the Lord.

"What would be the fun in that?" said the whale.

Despair seeped into my skin. I lay there and thought about my unfinished book, my failed campaigns, my inadequate life. I would have hated the whale for saving me if I'd had enough energy left to hate anything at that point.

After a while—could have been hours, could have been days—the whale said, "Come with me."

As if I had a choice.

She took me to a remote Pacific atoll and opened her mouth to show me a world untouched by humans: coral citadels boiling with life, pink marbled turtles winging between iridescent minarets, squadrons of steel sharks turning in formation, sunstruck fish pursuing their fluent business. Desire filled my throat. I wanted this world to keep existing, even if I never saw it again in my life. "Please," I said. "Give me one more go. I'll do what you asked."

The whale spit me out on the wharf. She breached once as she departed and I saw her mighty body rise out of the sea, striped with scars. Gill nets and fishing lines had cut her deeply, flensing fat from flesh.

I lay on the wharf in the golden sunlight, gulping air. Eventually, I got up. I was thirsty and had a monstrous headache. My clothes hung from me, salted and dried, like elephant skin. My matted hair stank of whale guts. A dude with a dirty-white dog and a shopping cart full of empties offered me a drink from a plastic bottle—water Nestle had stolen from an aquifer somewhere. It tasted divine.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"It's a long story."

The dog pointed its ears at me.

"She's blind," said the man. "I'm her Seeing Eye Human."

I had a promise to keep, so I started telling him about my book, about the Anthropocene and diebacks and the sixth great extinction.

He nodded grimly. He'd already lost his house to a hurricane, his health to a pandemic, his job to a recession. "Eventually it'll get the rich people too," he said.

He was heading downtown to cash in his empties. He said I could walk with him. His name was Brian and his dog's name was Blink. As we walked, I told him about the storm and the whale.

"Damn," he said. "Whale bites man. Now that's a story. Much better than your last one."

We gathered a crowd. Everyone who lived on the streets seemed to know Brian and they all wanted to hear about my sojourn inside a whale. I'd been in there for three days and three nights, apparently. I told them about the jay and the forest, and everyone agreed the storm was my punishment for refusing to help. They were all rooting for the trees. Every one of them had hung a tarp in the forest at one time or another. Eventually a cop car pulled over and two officers got out. They wanted to know where we were going and what we were doing and where Brian had gotten his shopping cart. When they ran my name, I guess my record came up, and so they stood around with their thumbs in their belts trying to decide what they should do. While they were discussing, a reporter showed up. She'd heard something on the police scanner and wanted to ask me a few questions about the incident with the whale. I had the presence of mind to work in a plea for the forest.

Then the TV crews arrived and things snowballed. A celebrity environmentalist with a *Life of Pi* survival story: perfect for the evening news. Conditions had worsened in recent years: the heat was impossible to ignore; coastal properties were under water; the air was so bad even the smokers were wearing masks. Suddenly people were ready to listen to my apocalyptic warnings. There was a photo shoot with *Vanity Fair* and an interview in *Rolling Stone* and even the bombastic mayor saw which way the winds were blowing and invited me to his country villa for cocktails. I mentioned the forest and he said he'd see what he could do.

After that I headed for home. I'd kept my promise. I knew it wouldn't change anything. The ice caps were still melting faster than two scoops of ice cream on a hot sidewalk.

I unlocked my front door, took a shower, brewed a pot of tea and carried it out to the garden.

And there was my cherry tree. Love of my life. Stripped to the bone. Gluey strands webbed her branches. She looked like a spider's victim, trussed and lifeless. The culprits dangled smugly from every

twig: glistening black worms as fat as my pinky. They had devoured every leaf and blossom. I knew the species; I'd written about them in my book. Driven to new habitats by a warming climate, they were coming for our urban canopy. I hadn't expected them to start in my own backyard.

Fury filled my arms. I seized a broom and beat the worms from the tree, stomped their swollen bodies, smeared their leafy innards all over the patio. I poured curses on them as I did. I beat them with all my pent-up rage at the compounding tragedies of the world and the knowledge that, in my whole life, I would never truly fix anything. I beat the worms until their bodies slicked the sidewalk. Then I fell into my deck chair and wept. I was empty. Scoured. Drained.

A voice spoke up: "You're angry." One worm had escaped my purge. She dangled in front of my face, revolving slowly at the end of her silk.

"No shit," I said.

"You're madder about the fate of your little tree than about this whole city with its parents and children, bankers and beggars, actuaries and artists, lovers and grandparents, dog owners and dentists."

"I loved my tree," I said.

"She wasn't yours to begin with."

"I raised her from a seed," I said.

"You loved her," said the worm. "But do you love me?"

"What?"

"Well, do you?"

"No," I said. "You're a blight upon the earth."

"Until you love me," she said, "you can never love yourself."

I looked down at the innards smeared across my patio stones. I waited for her to go on. But she had begun to spin herself into a chrysalis. I watched until she was wrapped in a silver shroud, like an icicle hanging from a branch.

I sat for a long time in my chair looking at my ravaged tree. Finally, I got up and took my book from the safe. I lit a fire in my barbecue and burned the pages one by one, watching their edges curl and char. The smoke got in my eyes and made me cry. When there was nothing left but leaves of ash, I looked around for the worm. As I watched, the chrysalis split open and a moth emerged, powder white, radiant as a bride. She shook out her wings, and I watched them dry in the sun, and then she lifted off into the air and flew away to lay her eggs somewhere. So ravishing and so bright. ♫